1. REPORT DATE **2013**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2013 to 00-00-2013**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **RAND Corporation,National Defense Research Institute,1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138,Santa Monica,CA,90407-2138**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**14**	

Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition

Jeffrey Martini, Erin York, and William Young

Less than two years since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, localized protests have morphed into full-blown civil conflict. What began as youths scrawling anti-regime graffiti in Daraa has given way to a countrywide insurgency that pits regime loyalists against a hodgepodge of army defectors, volunteers, and committed jihadists. Parallel to this internal escalation, the conflict has drawn in external actors, including both Syria's neighbors and extra-regional powers. There is a cruel irony in Syria emerging as an arena of strategic competition: The country that has traditionally used neighboring states as terrain for prosecuting its own conflicts has now become the object of external intervention. With the regional balance of power hinging on the conflict's outcome, Middle Eastern and extra-regional states have taken sides—some in support of the Assad regime, others in support of the opposition.

To address the issue of external involvement in Syria, RAND convened an analytic exercise on November 16, 2012, that brought together 26 subject matter experts who cover Syria and the various external players in the conflict. The purpose of the exercise, and of this report, was to generate a more-comprehensive understanding of the relationships between internal and external actors involved in Syria and how this dynamic is influencing the trajectory of the conflict. The United States was not a particular focus of discussion for several reasons. First, the exercise was designed to further understanding of the impact of outside intervention in Syria, not to debate U.S. policy options regarding the appropriate scope of American assistance to the opposition. Second, the United States has had a limited role in the conflict thus far relative to other external players. And finally, much has already been written about the costs and benefits of greater U.S. action in Syria.[1]

The experts who participated in this exercise were drawn both from inside government and outside it,[2] bringing decades of accumulated experience on the capabilities and intentions of the players attempting to shape the outcome of the Syrian conflict. The exercise began with a structured, not-for-attribution discussion examining how external players such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran view the stakes in Syria, and what strategies they are likely to employ to advance their interests. Participants then identified the key internal players and their particular

Key Findings

- Syria is likely to remain an arena of strategic competition for years to come.
- The financial and military aid flowing into Syria from external state actors has the potential to perpetuate the civil war in Syria and ignite larger regional hostilities between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.
- There is an asymmetry of interests among external actors: Those supporting the Assad regime see the conflict's stakes in starker terms than do supporters of the opposition.
- None of the "fence-sitters" inside Syria are likely to tip the balance of the conflict.
- Increased jihadi participation within the opposition will result in less support from most external actors and from "fence-sitters" inside Syria.
- External influence in the Syrian conflict would be decisive only if the United States significantly increased the scope of its support to the opposition or Iran or Russia significantly ratcheted back their support for Assad.

goals. The roundtable concluded with analysis of the relationships developing between internal and external actors and the effect those relationships might have on the future of both Syria and the broader regional security environment. Participants also filled out questionnaires at the end of each session that captured their views in a more formal way. The results of the exercise are the foundation for this report, although the authors also drew from their own expertise as well as English- and Arabic-language secondary sources.

Mapping External Influence in Syria

Since the outbreak of the current uprising in Syria, external actors have sought to shape the conflict's outcome. These external players include neighboring countries that seek to contain spillover effects, such as Turkey and Iraq; aspirants for regional power, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia; and extra-regional actors

that have their own particular equities, such as Russia. The players' interests vary—as do the strategies for advancing them. However, external actors can generally be classified into one of three camps (see Table 1). The first camp comprises those supporting the Assad regime in its attempts to defeat or co-opt the opposition. This group is headlined by Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. At the other end of the spectrum are actors aiding the Syrian opposition to various degrees and seeking the removal of the Assad regime. This group features Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Libya, Jordan, the United States, and its NATO allies. Left in the middle are the nonaligned that have yet to take a firm position or have split allegiances. Israel and Iraq are two players that have tried to avoid being sucked into the Syrian conflict; Lebanon is split among different factions supporting opposing sides.

The particular calculus driving these actors varies considerably, even within camps. For example, both Saudi Arabia and the United States have a strong interest in peeling Syria from Iran; both view the conflict through the lens of the broader regional balance of power and seek to deprive Iran of the ally through which Tehran projects influence in the Levant. Turkey's interests, on the other hand, revolve around containing the conflict's spillover effects. The current stalemate has led to a huge influx of refugees into Turkey, cross-border fighting that has destabilized the Turkish border, a loss of bilateral trade, and—perhaps most importantly from Ankara's perspective—the prospect of an emboldened Kurdish community capitalizing on a Syrian vacuum of authority to consolidate its autonomy. Jordan has similar concerns, although Amman has preferred to operate quietly behind the scenes, consistent with Jordan's historical approach to foreign policy. And finally, there are states supporting the Syrian opposition that are primarily driven by a sense of solidarity with a shared identity group. Libya's position, for example, is an expression of fellowship with fellow Arab revolutionaries while the GCC states are supporting their co-religionists (i.e., the Sunni Muslim majority in Syria that is fighting an Alawi-dominated regime).

On the flip side of the coin are the various external actors aligned with the Assad regime. Iran seeks to prevent the loss of Syria as its primary ally in the Arab world. Tehran's alliance with Damascus affords Iran many benefits—it diminishes Iran's isolation in the region, provides a conduit for supplying Hezbollah,

and prevents the United States from consolidating its position as the primary power in the region. Hezbollah's interests in the Syrian conflict are existential: It depends on Syria as a supplier and transit point of its armaments and justifiably fears that a Sunni-led Syria would cut off this important supply route. In addition to the Iran-Hezbollah nexus, Russia has its own interest in Syria, its only remaining foothold in the Middle East. Moscow's relationship with Damascus, rooted in longstanding cooperation between the two states dating back to the Cold War, affords Russia its only port in the Mediterranean (Tartus). As a regime backsliding into authoritarianism, Russia also has an interest in halting the wave of popular revolutions that have toppled one autocracy after another. Finally, Russia's leverage with a front-line state in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has provided Moscow an important bargaining chip in its interactions with regional powers such as Israel and Turkey.[3]

The third camp includes the regional actors that have abstained from taking a firm position. In the case of Israel, it has used military force against Assad's forces on several occasions during the uprising. But this was either in response to Syrian mortar fire on Israeli military outposts in the Golan Heights or to limit the flow of arms to Hezbollah. What Israel has not done is overtly channel support to the Syrian opposition. This caution is a reflection of two factors. First, Israel's interests in Syria are themselves contradictory. On the one hand, Tel Aviv would benefit from cutting the supply route to Hezbollah and further isolating Iran. On the other hand, the prospect of a Syrian successor state that is even more hostile to Israel than the Assad regime, or the possibility that Syria could become a haven for jihadi elements, leaves the Israelis conflicted about the wisdom of supporting the opposition. The second driver of Israel's wariness is the recognition of having little ability to shape the outcome—and should Tel Aviv try, the efforts are likely to be counterproductive given the baggage that would come from the opposition receiving even the appearance of Israeli support.

As for Iraq, Baghdad has stability concerns not altogether different from those of Ankara. Iraq is vulnerable to spillover effects that include the burden of hosting refugees, an exacerbation of its own sectarian problems, and an emboldening of Kurdish ambitions. But Baghdad must also balance those interests against placating Iran, and so far, it appears to be

Table 1. Alignment of External Actors		
Opposition to Assad Regime	**Non-Aligned**	**Support for Assad Regime**
Turkey	Israel	Russia
Saudi Arabia	Iraq	Iran
United States	Lebanon	Hezbollah
GCC States		
Jordan		
Libya		

doing so by allowing its airspace to be used by Tehran to deliver aid to the Assad regime.[4] To further complicate Iraq's position, the country's populace is sharply divided in its allegiances. There are elements among Iraq's Sunni-Arab community that are sending material and fighters to the Syrian opposition, while the Sadrists and other Shi'ite groups are funneling support to Assad.

Asymmetry of Interests

The particular strategies of the different external players reveal a clear asymmetry of interests. Simply put, external actors supporting the opposition see the stakes of the conflict as lower than do external actors supporting the Assad regime. For Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Libya, the GCC states, and the West, the fall of the Assad regime could bring strategic benefits. But notwithstanding the humanitarian consequences, Assad remaining in power does not pose an intolerable threat to these actors' vital interests. Conversely, Iran and Hezbollah have greater stakes in the outcome of the conflict. For Iran, the fall of the regime would likely deprive it of its sole ally among the Arab states and reduce the "rejectionist axis" to Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, the latter of which has already taken steps to distance itself from Damascus. And for Hezbollah, its very existence as a military force is at stake, in that Hezbollah depends on Syria as the principal corridor by which it receives arms—including the rocket arsenal that provides the group a measure of deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. It is this asymmetry of interests that led 15 of the exercise participants to rank Iran or Hezbollah as the most consequential actor in the outcome of the Syrian conflict, while no external actor supporting the opposition received more than three first-place votes.

The asymmetry of interests also manifest in the external actors' particular strategies. Whereas supporters of the opposition have generally been cautious in the types and scope of aid provided, those backing the Assad regime have been much more forward-leaning. The United States has been most restrained, thus far limiting its assistance to diplomatic support and non-lethal aid. Within the pro-opposition bloc, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller GCC states have been somewhat more ambitious, although even these states have not provided the type of anti-aircraft or heavy artillery that could shift the military balance. Additionally, heightened support has been flowing to militias with jihadist ideologies from nonstate external actors such as al Qaeda and independent parties from the Gulf; this support includes funding, weapons, and fighting expertise, and exceeds the assistance offered to secular opposition fighters.[5]

On the flip side, external supporters of the Assad regime have gone so far as to directly backstop the military capabilities of the regime's security forces. It is widely reported that the Iranian Quds force is on the ground in Syria, operating in both training and surveillance capacities, while Hezbollah militants are fighting and dying alongside the Assad regime.[6] This variation in the depth of commitment of the external actors accounts for their relative influence on the conflict's outcome. Since

External actors supporting the opposition see the stakes of the conflict as lower than do external actors supporting the Assad regime.

influence is a function both of capability and an actor's willingness to employ it, the caution of the pro-opposition camp diminishes its overall influence while the strong commitment of the pro-Assad camp operates as a force multiplier that increases its influence.

Internal Actors in the Syrian Conflict

Syria's internal landscape of players has grown increasingly complex in the context of the protracted conflict. As with external actors, the internal players also may be roughly categorized into one of three camps: the Assad regime and those that support it, the more loosely organized opposition that has taken up arms against it, and the "fence-sitters" that have yet to declare full support for one side or the other. However, players are not unitary actors and may be divided in their allegiances or equivocal in their degree of support. Additionally, the internal landscape is inherently volatile as groups realign themselves in shifting coalitions. For example, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, formed in November 2012, has supplanted the Syrian National Council as the internationally recognized representative of the Syrian people, and may (or may not) attract support from currently noncommittal players. Given this ambiguity, it is useful to consider the range of positions between the Assad regime and the opposition as a continuum rather than a binary classification. It is then possible to map players onto this continuum and demonstrate the degree to which they currently lean in either direction (Figure 1).

The Assad Regime and Its Supporters

A Baathist, Alawite-dominated regime has controlled Syria since Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970, and the administration he constructed has maintained a tight grip on state institutions ever since.[7] Weathering both internal challenges and a potentially fraught transfer of power from Hafez to Bashar in 2000, the Assad regime has now endured 40 years. Today, the regime's grip on power is being challenged by a popular uprising that pits the Sunni-Arab majority against the minority-led regime. In this fight, Assad commands authority over core elements of the military and internal security services, although defections are rife among primarily Sunni conscripts and, increasingly, officers. And despite the regime's willingness to take on the opposition using air power and heavy weapons (e.g., artillery, armor, and Scud missiles), the uprising has now spread to engulf major cities and strategic regions, even posing a threat to Damascus.

Given these conditions, the regime's primary interest is survival, and its predication on a strategic minority leaves its core supporters wary of retribution should Assad fall.[8] This helps

Figure 1. Degrees of Support of Various Internal Players for the Assad Regime or the Opposition
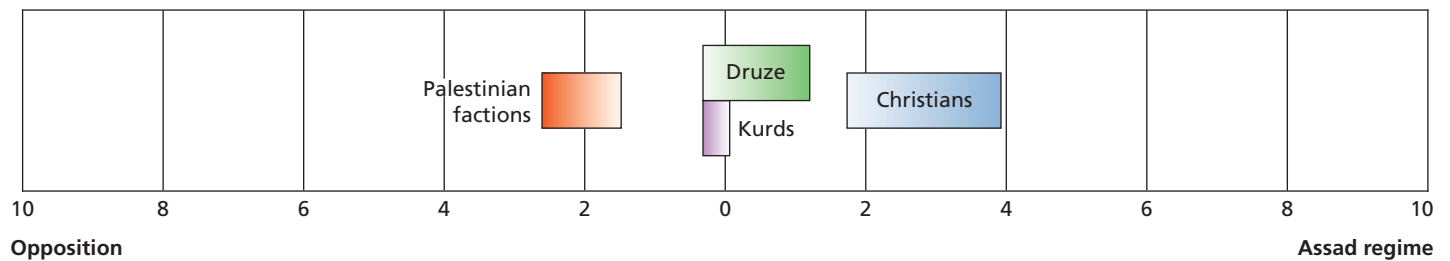
NOTE: Each player on this chart is placed on the spectrum based on their perceived levels of support for the Assad regime and for the opposition. The size and shading of the box reflects the group's internal variance of support for each side (i.e., a wider box indicates a group with more internal variance in support for one side or another, whereas a smaller box indicates a group with less internal variance). The ranges are based on the results of a survey completed by 18 experts at the November 2012 analytic exercise, where they were asked to rank internal actors in their degree of support for the opposition and for the Assad regime on a scale of 1–10.
RAND *RR213-1*

explain why the regime was reluctant to negotiate a solution to the conflict despite opportunities to do so before the uprising became militarized or spread nationwide. Analysts differ on whether the regime would settle for falling back on an Alawite stronghold along the Syrian coast should they prove unable to hold the capital; some see a retreat to this region as a possible "Plan B."[9] The motivation would not simply be the regime's interest in hanging on to power—leading Alawites in the security services might seek to move forces there to protect their families from reprisals. Other analysts, however, argue that ethnic and sectarian intermixing in the coastal region makes this area much less hospitable to an Alawite redoubt than commonly assumed.[10] And still others question whether Assad and his inner circle have the humility to accept defeat and settle for living to fight another day—not to mention whether this would be sustainable unless Sunni Arabs remain factionalized.[11]

Brute force features heavily in the regime's strategy for defeating the uprising, although Assad also employs more nuanced tactics. For example, the regime has sought to deter undecided elements of the population from joining the opposition by playing on fears of sectarian violence, painting the primarily Sunni-Arab opposition as a threat to Syria's ethnic and sectarian minorities. And to hedge against even further defections from Syrian military units, the regime has made extensive use of a shadowy plainclothed militia known as the *shabiha*. Over the years, the regime has also succeeded in co-opting some families among the most aggrieved communities (e.g., Sunni-Arabs and Kurds), creating a source of insider knowledge that can be drawn upon when sending forces into restive areas. And while the regime has been far from surgical in its response, it has withheld violence against communities that abstain from supporting the uprising, providing a strong incentive for communities to remain neutral in the fight.

Opposition Actors

There are many layers to the Syrian opposition, although none can plausibly claim to command authority over the movement in its entirety. At one level is the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (National Coalition hereafter), which operates as the officially recognized face of the opposition and its interlocutor with the international community. Despite the emergence of the National Coalition as a more representative successor to the Syrian National Council, there are still questions as to the degree of allegiance the National Coalition commands from activists and fighters on the ground. Within Syria, oppositionists coordinate through the aptly named Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). Finally, with respect to the armed uprising, the opposition is composed of a loosely organized set of militias fighting in different geographic regions. The amalgamation of forces is collectively known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), although it is really a collection of independent militias, its "army" descriptor notwithstanding. These militias are made up of defectors from the Syrian army, amateur fighters with little or no military experience, and jihadis including some smattering of foreign fighters.[12]

If the Assad regime is primarily interested in its own survival, the FSA has the opposite interest—replacing it. This objective, however, is where the shared interests of these militias both start and stop. The different groups that make up the FSA are united in their immediate goal of deposing the Assad regime, but vary considerably in their views of what should replace it. Some militias operate narrowly as local protection forces and do not seem to have given much thought to the contours of a future state, while other fighters frame the struggle in religious terms, prosecuting what they see as a jihad that will lead to Islamic rule. Many activists have a democratic vision of Syria in which authoritarianism would be replaced by representative governance and respect for minority rights.

Reluctant Internal Actors

Although Syria is polarized between the regime and opposition forces, a large segment of the population remains uncommitted. A majority of the Syrian population is Sunni Muslim, but the country is a patchwork of diversity with Christians, Druze, and

ethnic Kurds composing substantial minorities (see Figure 2). As noted above, the regime has played on minority concerns to deter these communities from siding with the primarily Sunni opposition. Syria's minority groups fear being subject to domination at the hands of the Sunni-Arab majority, and for all the shortcomings of the Assad regime, many Christians and Druze see the state as a bulwark against Islamism.

The practices of opposition forces have done little to mitigate the concerns of Syria's non-Muslim and non-Arab populations. For example, Jabhat al-Nusra, the jihadi group that includes many fighters who previously fought under the umbrella of al Qaeda in Iraq, has specifically targeted Kurdish groups in what appear to be ethnically motivated attacks on Syria's largest non-Arab minority.[13] Yet, leaders of both the Syrian National Coalition and the FSA criticized the United States for designating Jabhat al-Nusra as a foreign terrorist organization prohibited from receiving American assistance.[14] Syrian minorities' fears of retribution are further stoked by observation of Iraq, where the fall of a similar regime—a Baathist state predicated on a strategic minority—led to significant bloodletting.

Figure 2 depicts the leanings of these "fence-sitters," but it must be understood that it indicates collective trends for each group rather than reflecting the individual affiliation of every member of a given community. Concerns of sectarian violence weigh heavily for Syria's sizable Christian population, which has historical ties to the Alawite regime; the smaller Druze populations concentrated in the south do not possess strong connections to the Assad leadership but still benefited from the principle of religious equality affected by the minority-led regime. The fact that many elements of these communities remain loyal to the regime provides Assad much-needed cover for the narrative that he is protecting the state from terrorism. Should the Christians and Druze solidly defect to the opposition, Assad would be further isolated. Regardless of how these minority communities break, it is unlikely they would decisively change the military balance of power inside Syria.

As for the Kurdish populations in the north of the country, many external observers of the conflict view this community as a potential "king maker."[15] Syria's Kurds represent a large undecided group, and the military capabilities of their cross-border brethren in Iraq conjure images of a well-armed peshmerga that could tip the military balance. But this image overstates the Syrian Kurds' organizational cohesion and military capabilities. Since the militarization of the conflict, Syria's Kurds have resisted open affiliation with either side, preferring to further their own autonomy rather than be sucked into a conflict with no clear winner.[16] The strategy has spared the Kurds from the same scope of repression that the regime has meted out to opposition hotbeds such as Homs and Hama, leaving the Kurds with control of the northeast in a bid to pit them against the Free Syrian Army.[17] In this respect, the Kurds' wait-and-see strategy has paid dividends—but has also led to clashes with elements of the opposition, including jihadist elements.[18] Additionally, it is unclear how the Kurds' abstention from

the conflict will bring them closer to their long-term goal of greater autonomy. In fact, their nonalignment may help enable the regime to prevail, in which case the regime is likely to attempt reasserting its writ over the whole of the country.

Relationships Between Internal and External Actors

The myriad interests at stake in the outcome of the Syrian conflict have led to burgeoning relationships between internal and external actors, as depicted in Table 2. Although they differ over the best strategy to defeat the regime and what a post-Assad Syria should look like, the bloc of states supporting the opposition are working to topple Assad in concert with the National Coalition, Free Syrian Army, Local Coordination Committees, and—directly or indirectly—jihadis. This bloc is countered by external supporters of the Assad regime and its Alawite power base. Finally, a third group consists of internal and external actors who have sought to remain neutral or are so internally divided that it is not possible to classify these players as belonging to one camp or the other.

Despite the ambitions of external actors to shape the outcome of the Syrian conflict, a shift in external support is likely to prove the decisive factor only in a narrow set of circumstances. This is because the most influential players—including Iran and the United States—have already taken sides. Thus, there is no "swing vote" left among the non-aligned and "fence-sitters" capable of shifting the military balance inside Syria. Of course, should the external supporters of the opposition intervene militarily, or expand the scope of their assistance to include the provision of anti-aircraft capabilities to the FSA, that would likely sink the Assad regime. Similarly, Russian or Iranian withdrawal of support would also spell the end of the regime. But if the internal and external actors' positions remain as currently configured, the Syrian conflict appears destined to remain a war of attrition in which opposition forces slowly gain the upper hand as they expand their support base, capture more territory and equipment from the regime, and employ asymmetric warfare tactics that better leverage their capabilities.

The Effect of Future Developments on the Calculus of External Actors

As the conflict evolves, several developments could change the relative influence of external players—although few, if any, players are likely to "flip" their basic allegiances. The Obama administration recognized the National Coalition as Syria's legitimate representative in December 2012, but the United States and NATO allies need more convincing that the group

There is no "swing vote" left among the non-aligned and "fence-sitters" capable of shifting the military balance inside Syria.

Figure 2. Syria's Ethnic Composition

Major ethnic groups	
▮	Alawites
▮	Sunnis
▮	Druze
▮	Kurd
▮	Christians
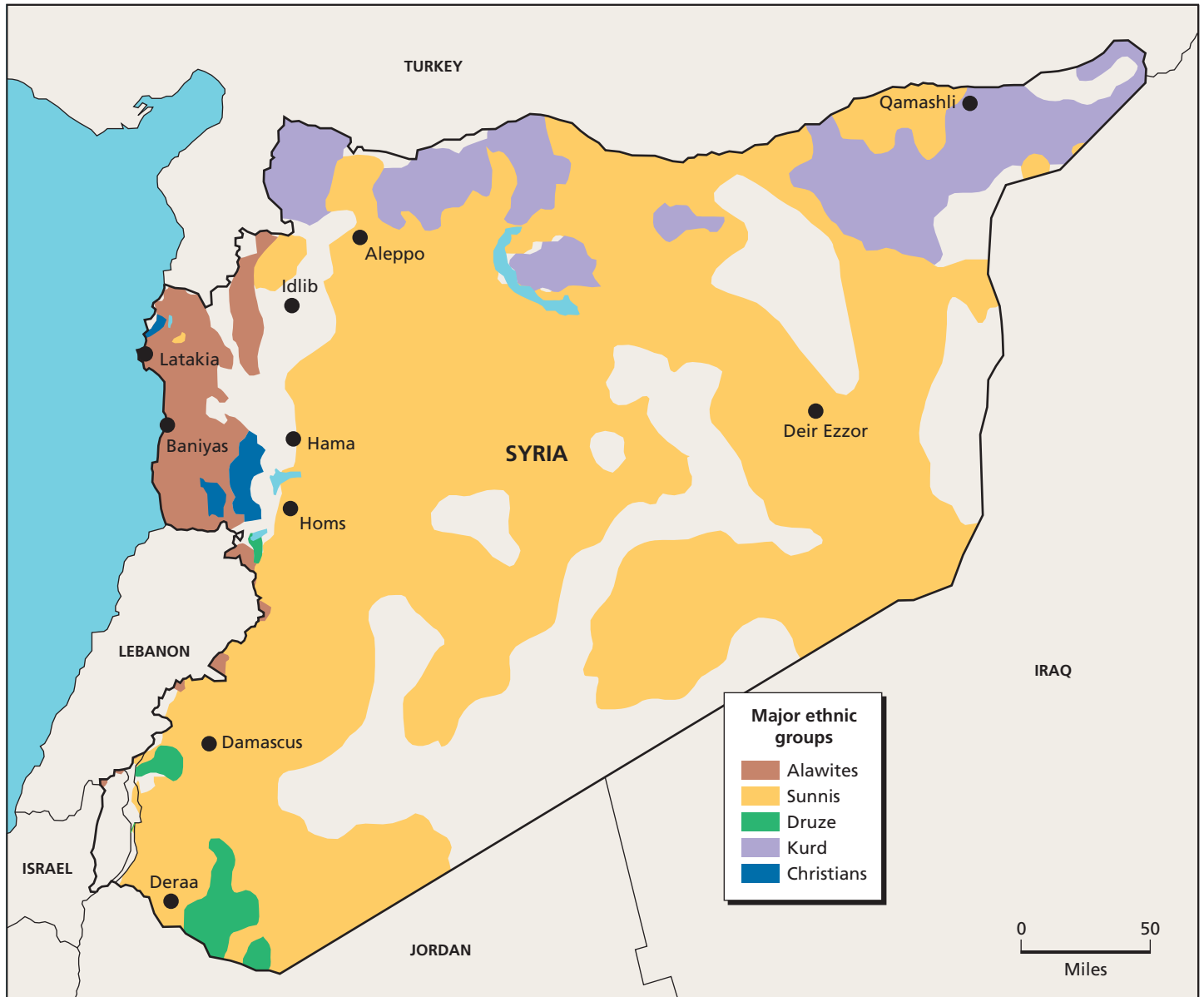
SOURCE: Data from M. Izady, "Gulf/2000 Project," web page, 2003. As of February 15, 2013:
http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml
NOTE: Map does not reflect complex ethnic divisions in main population centers.
RAND *RR213-2*

would govern a post-Assad Syria in an inclusive, responsible manner. This could lead to the provision of military assistance such as anti-aircraft weapons or the establishment of a no-fly zone that would tilt the military balance in favor of opposition forces. Similarly, Assad's use of unconventional weapons would likely motivate direct Western intervention, given humanitarian considerations and the importance of restoring deterrence on the use of these weapons.[19] These developments would not only increase support for the opposition, they would also diminish outside support for the Assad regime. In particular, the use of chemical weapons could lead Russia to withdraw its support. And while Iran and Hezbollah are much more entrenched in

their positions than Moscow, Hezbollah might distance itself from Assad for fear of compromising its domestic support in Lebanon.

The main development that could lead to a diminution of external support to the opposition is an increase in the jihadi presence within Syria. What assistance has flowed to the opposition is contingent on their patrons' faith that a successor regime in Syria would be preferable to Assad. For the United States, Turkey, and other NATO allies, the threat of Syria devolving into an ungoverned space in which jihadi groups enjoy freedom of movement would fail this criteria. An increased jihadi role in the opposition would be particularly constraining on the scope

of military assistance that outside actors would be willing to provide, generating concern that those arms could eventually be turned on Israeli or Western interests. Saudi Arabia and its GCC counterparts would likely have greater tolerance for supporting jihadi groups, although it is not clear that the Arab Gulf states would countenance arming groups that explicitly profess allegiance to al Qaeda.[20]

Finally, in considering developments that could change the map of external players, it is important to differentiate between position shifts designed to change the military balance and simple bandwagoning. That is to say, the most influential external actors will be those that redouble or ratchet back support before the conflict's outcome is determined. If the current stalemate is broken and one side or the other emerges as an inevitable victor, the map of external players will almost certainly adjust so that as many actors as possible can claim to be aligned with the winner. This is a natural process that could speed the outcome of the conflict but will not be the decisive factor in determining the victor. Much more significant would be early adoption of shifts in position—for example, Russia abstaining from arming the regime, the United States and NATO establishing a no-fly zone, or Saudi Arabia providing anti-aircraft weapons to the opposition, any of which would shift the military balance at a phase when the outcome of the conflict remains in doubt.

There is some uncertainty regarding the impact of further protraction of the conflict. Some experts said during the exercise that continued stasis would benefit the Assad regime, particularly because the opposition remains so divided on crucial elements of strategy and future governance. Others believe that the regime will slowly bleed support as time goes on and atrocities continue to pile up, pointing to the growing list of defectors as evidence that the opposition is gaining ground.

Whatever the eventual outcome of the conflict, the consequences of external intervention are likely to reverberate within Syria for years to come. Analysts need look no farther than Lebanon or Iraq to see the legacies of external intervention in states with fractured sectarian and ethnic makeups. Like Lebanon and Iraq, Syria is penetrable because the nation is divided. With primordial loyalties running just as strong as allegiances to the nation-state, internal communities are motivated to seek foreign benefactors capable of protecting their interests or expanding their power. The patron-client relationship that develops—as seen between Saudi Arabia and elements of the Sunni-Arab community in Lebanon, and between Iran and elements of the Iraqi Shi'a community—tends to reinforce divisions within the country. This condition is particularly explosive when the relationships that develop between external and internal players play out along sectarian divides, as they do in Syria insofar as Sunni-led states (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Turkey) are among the most forward-leaning supporters of the Syrian opposition, while Shi'a actors (e.g., Iran and Hezbollah) remain the strongest supporters of the Assad regime.

Spillover Effects

In addition to the conflict's ramifications within Syria, consequences of this struggle are also likely to ricochet into the broader region, exacerbating sectarianism in the Levant and the Arab Gulf. Even before the onset of the uprising, it was noted that Syria is, in some ways, the perfect jihad,[21] pitting Sunni against Shi'a in a continuation of a longstanding power struggle in the Islamic world. Although there have been several examples of minority-led regimes in the Middle East in which a Sunni-Arab minority reigned over a Shi'a majority (Saddam Hussein's Iraq and present-day Bahrain are two such examples), Syria is the only state in which a Sunni-Arab majority is ruled by a minority Shi'a offshoot. This has tremendous resonance among jihadis who see the conflict in Syria as a way to correct the anomaly by asserting

Table 2. Relations Between External and Internal Actors		
Opposition to Assad Regime	**Non-Aligned**	**Support for Assad Regime**
External Actors	External Actors	External Actors
Turkey	Israel	Russia
Saudi Arabia	Iraq	Iran
United States	Lebanon	Hezbollah
GCC States		
Jordan		
Libya		
Internal Actors	Internal Actors	Internal Actors
FSA	Kurds	Assad regime
LCCs	Christians	Alawi community
National Coalition	Druze	
Jihadis	Palestinian factions inside Syria	

Sunni dominance. And many jihadis also see Syria as a base from which to confront Israel and eventually liberate Palestine.[22]

The dynamics of strategic competition in Syria can also be expected to further strain relations between and within the pro-opposition and pro-Assad blocs. The current proxy war being played out between the Western-aligned states in Syria against the so-called "rejectionist axis" will not improve the prospects of negotiating broader regional disputes, including Iran's nuclear program. But even within blocs, the Syrian conflict will eventually drive wedges between partners whose interests do not perfectly align. For example, the United States and Saudi Arabia may agree on the need to bring down the Assad regime, but their visions of a future Syria are likely to differ markedly.

Conclusion

This report examines the conflict in Syria through the lens of regional rivalries. In doing so, it finds that the stakes of the conflict in Syria are such that the country is likely to remain an arena of strategic competition for years to come. The external actors involved in the conflict have laid out diametrically opposed positions that leave little room for a negotiated settlement. Internally, Syria's combustible ethnic and sectarian makeup incentivizes groups to seek external support. The result is fertile terrain for strategic competition that will persist well beyond any formal resolution of the conflict.

Moreover, if the current scope of assistance offered by opposition supporters and Assad supporters remains unchanged, the conflict is likely to be protracted. All of the key players that bring military capabilities have taken sides, and the remaining fence-sitters inside Syria are not in a position to tip the military balance. While the overall capabilities of the pro-opposition bloc far outweigh the overall capabilities of the pro-Assad bloc, the asymmetry of interests and, correspondingly, the level of support that runs in the favor of the pro-Assad camp help to level the playing field. Given how entrenched the external players are in their affiliations, the more realistic game changer at this point would be a ratcheting up or down of support provided by external players, not a "flip" in these actors' basic orientations.

The one exception would be the provision of direct military assistance from the United States and NATO—either in the form of establishing a no-fly zone or the provision of anti-aircraft capabilities to the FSA. Participants in the exercise were nearly unanimous that this would be one of the few shifts in positions that would prove decisive in settling the conflict. However, it must be noted that this report is not necessarily advocating that step. Reaching that conclusion would require a different study approach that looked not only at the positions of various external actors, but also whether the costs of military intervention—both in terms of resources and potential unintended consequences—would outweigh the strategic benefit of removing Assad. In this report, the authors have more modestly set out to present a framework for understanding the Syrian conflict, examining how external actors are partnering with internal actors to shape the outcome of the conflict.

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, Steven Cook, "It's Time to Think Seriously About Intervening in Syria," *The Atlantic,* January 17, 2012. As of February 5, 2013:
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[11] Cecily Hilleary, "Could an Alawite State in Syria Prevent Post-Assad Reprisals?" Voice of America, December 20, 2012. As of February 5, 2013:
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[13] "Muqātilūn Islāmīyūn Yughatālūn Ra's al-Majlis al-Mahallī al-Kurdī fī Rā's al-'Ayn Shamāl Sharq Sūrīya" [Islamic Fighters Assassinate the Head of a Local Kurdish Council in Ras al-'Ayn in North East Syria], *Al Hayat,* November 19, 2012

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[16] 'Abd al-Wahab Badr Khan, "Akrād Sūrīya ma' Thawrat al-Sha'b am Daddha?" [Are Syrian Kurds With the People's Revolution or Against It?] *Al Hayat,* November 29, 2012.

[17] Joshua Landis, "Assad's Kurdish Strategy," Syria Comment, August 20, 2012. As of February 5, 2013:
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[18] Jehad Saleh, "The Salafi Emirate of Ras al-Ain," Fikra Forum, December 20, 2012. As of February 5, 2013:
http://fikraforum.org/?p=2961
See also, "Syrian Rebels Clash with Armed Kurds," *Al Jazeera,* November 19, 2012. As of February 5, 2013:
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[19] U.S. officials have made several statements explicitly addressing this contingency. President Obama warned, "I want to make it absolutely clear to Assad and those under his command: The world is watching. The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable. And if you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences, and you will be held accountable." Remarks at the National War College, December 3, 2012; Secretary Clinton called chemical weapons "a red line for the United States." Remarks With Czech Republic Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, December 3, 2012.

[20] There are, however, wealthy citizens and religious organizations in the Arab Gulf who are and will continue channeling support to these groups.

[21] This concept of "perfect jihad" is adapted from Nibras Kazimi's portrayal of the Alawites as the "perfect enemy" for Sunni jihadists in his book *Syria Through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy,* Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2010. Kazimi details the history of animosity between the Nusayri/Alawite community in Syria and Sunni extremist theologians. For further information please also see Fouad Ajami, T*he Syrian Rebellion,* Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2012; and Yaron Friedman, *The Nusayri-Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria,* Boston, Mass.: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2010. For further historical background on Sunni-Shiʻa tension in the Levant, see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies,* London: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 541–550.

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About This Report

The purpose of this research is to assess the role of external actors in the Syrian uprising. The report begins by analyzing what is driving both regional (e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia) and extra-regional (e.g., Russia) players to intervene in the Syrian conflict. It then proceeds to look at the internal actors (e.g., the Free Syrian Army and Alawite community) that may operate as conduits of external influence. The report concludes with an examination of the relationships between external and internal actors and their potential impact on the trajectory of the conflict.

This research was conducted within the Intelligence Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community.

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Acknowledgments

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